

“A New Precedent”
Pentecost 2a
Matthew 10:40-42

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In Jesus' Name.

God authorized Jeremiah to be his prophet saying, “See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” Jeremiah did precious little of the latter, the good stuff, the building and planting. Most of what he said sounds like this, “I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking. And all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger. For thus says the Lord: The whole land shall be a desolation....” It sounds like Jeremiah has gone back to Genesis 1 and run it in reverse. God’s good creation is undone until there is nothing but the fruitful void.

Chapter after chapter Jeremiah complained on God’s behalf because the people had gone (as he said) whoring after other gods and trampled on the poor in their greedy pursuit of more and more. Chapter after chapter he spoke in the hearing of the king and nobles and all the people telling them it was God’s will for them to submit to the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, the superpower to their north and east. Jeremiah not only preached surrender he acted it out. He took a yoke, the wooden frame used over the necks of oxen, binding them to a plow or wagon. He placed it over his own neck as he preached submission to the yoke of Babylon. He said repentance before God and submission to God’s punishment were their only hope for survival. His message was treason and it was tiresome and he acted like a crackpot. People nicknamed him Magor Misabib, meaning “Terrible Terror.” They saw him coming and said, “Here comes old Terrible Terror.”

Jeremiah was not the only prophet in town. In fact from chapters 27 and 28 there appear to be a raft of them. Not a one of them agreed with Jeremiah. They were to a man prophets of good news. Hannaniah, whom we meet in the first reading today, was typical. His name means God is graceful. He took the yoke from Jeremiah shoulders, broke it, and said, “Within two years the Babylonian threat will pass. The treasure they looted from the temple and the people they

forced into exile will all return.” There is something else you should know about Hananiah and his fellow “yea-saying” prophets, as Jeremiah called them. They were all on the king’s payroll. Just to keep the record straight, there was one other prophet who agreed with Jeremiah. He was put to death. That also may help to explain the unanimity of the rest of them in telling the king what he wanted to hear.

Jeremiah responded, “I pray what you are saying comes to pass. But Hananiah and the rest of you are out of step with all the prophets who have gone before. From ancient times they prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. You are setting a new precedent,” said Jeremiah. “The only way to know which of us speaks God’s word is when that word comes to pass.” Of course, it is too late by then.

So how shall we know which speaks the true Word of the Lord. Jeremiah’s argument relied heavily on precedent. The case is easy to make for Jeremiah. Take a quick ramble through the adventures of Elijah and Elisha. Glance over the litany Amos took up at the king’s shrine at Bethel, “For the three the four sins of,” and on he went announcing God’s judgment. Hosea told of the peoples’ fickle hearts and God’s broken heart, from which God unleashed a torrent of condemnation. These are the proceedings of an ugly divorce between God and his people. That we have a book of Jeremiah rather than a book of Hananiah tells us there was no new precedent being set with Hananiah. Jeremiah was the true prophet, speaking God’s words of judgment and calling the people to repentance.

The message and mission Jesus initiated in Matthew chapter 10 stand in stark contrast to Jeremiah’s. Jesus does set a new precedent. He summoned his disciples as God summoned Jeremiah. Jesus likewise authorized those he called. He gave them his own authority over unclean spirit, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. He sent them out with the commission, “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’” Jeremiah said we’d have to wait and see. But in Jesus the wait is over. The kingdom of God is at hand in him. The disciples were sent out to proclaim that good news. The prophetic actions in which they engaged enacted the kingdom of God. They cured the sick, raised the dead, cleansed the lepers, and cast out demons. In other words they acted on the promise of new creation made in Jesus’ death and resurrection. They did this before the fact. They acted in

anticipation. So do we. Jesus death and resurrection are in the past to be sure. But the fulfillment of the promises awaits his return.

All prophetic condemnation exhausted itself on the cross. Our sin Jesus took upon himself to leave in his grave. He broke death's power when he rose. He mortally wounded the Evil One. Jesus banished all the powers hostile to the rule of God and all the forces that disfigure us and the rest of God's creation. We rest on the promises. We rely on the promises radiating from the empty tomb.

Yet, the proclamation of good news gets about as much of a welcome as Jeremiah's bad news.

- God's Word, be it judgment or promise, requires our submission. I think that is one reason for a tepid welcome. We'd very much like to be in charge of the agenda.
- Secondly, some people are quite happy with their demons. If happy is not the right word exactly, these demons cause an old, familiar pain which becomes a kind of self-pity refuge. We find solace in our demons rather than in God.
- Some refuse a welcome because God's grace offends their sense of justice. We want to see people get what they've got coming to them. Jesus and his followers announce the kingdom of God is at hand with all its benefits of forgiveness and blessing and life eternal with no regard to our merit or deserving. God declares us righteous for Jesus' sake and then God sets about through his Spirit to make us what he has declared us to be. We are used to earning our own way and achieving our own goals. Here we are told we can't. It is the Spirit working in us.
- Jeremiah voiced God's complaint about the peoples' idolatry. That remains a malady blocking a hospitable welcome to God's kingdom. A college student forwarded to her father a link to a blog post from the Dublin Review of Books web site. Her father sent it on to me and now I'm forwarding it to you. The blogger wrote, "Some find all the spiritual sustenance they need in the cult of good food and fine wine with occasional excursions to the shrines of SS Gucci, Prada, Hermes, Donna Karan and Jimmy Choo."¹ An excursions to the lesser shrine of TJ Max and the like.

¹ http://www.dr.b.ie/book_news/11-06-13/I_m_An_Atheist_Myself_Thank_God.aspx

- The blog goes on to talk about the collapse of our “get-rich-quick model of economic development.” The good news of the advent of the kingdom of God will be heard as judgment by those participating in an economy in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.
- Some would hijack rather than welcome the news of God’s kingly rule and turn it into ideology of either the left or right. One commentator deftly defines ideology as a popular word of establishment confidence clothed in the garment of divine speech.²

In regard to those who do not welcome the bearers of good news, at the Come-to-Jesus Meeting which is the Day of Judgment it will go easier for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Jesus promised a reward to the ones who welcome the bearers of his good news. The reward is not monetary. The reward is not that we will be wealthy. It is not a promise of good health. The reward is nothing less than the invitation to take up the cross and follow him.³ Following him, we, like the disciples before, are those sent to live according to the precedent of Jesus’ resurrection. The precedent holds the promise of our own resurrection and the daily living out of its power. Resurrection power is not to be confused with power as the world knows it. Resurrection power is God’s mercy that has the power to transform lives. It is a fierce mercy. Sometimes it feels like a savage grace and tough love that can take hold of our lives and right size them. To bolster the promise we have the whole apostolic witness of the Word of God. Let’s claim the reward offered in the invitation. Take up the cross and follow.

² Patrick D. Miller, “Commentary and Reflections on the Book of Jeremiah,” *New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VI*, p. 784.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 112.